
BELGRADE'S CHINESE TEMPTATIONS¹

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1. Introduction

In 2013, the official Belgrade concluded a historical agreement with Kosovo. Some observers think it could mean even a *de facto* recognition of the “Holy Serbian land”. Such an unpleasant business for Serbia has been carried on by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS, founded by the elements of Vojislav Šešelj’s Radical Party), together with former Slobodan Milošević’s Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS). Subsequently, a large majority in the Serbian Parliament has accepted the agreement, thereby fulfilling another condition on the road towards EU integration, while many other prerequisites are still waiting.

The agreement with Pristina (aimed at the normalization of the relations between the two sides) was the ultimate condition for Serbia in order to finally open the accession negotiations with Brussels, and thereby, to continue the complex procedure of joining the EU. The integration process that conservative forces perceive as a “selling off of the country”, for the governing coalition and the mainstream opposition, is a road without alternatives.

A few years ago, when Boris Tadić and his Democratic Party (DS) were governing in coalition with the SPS, they refused to sit at the table and to negotiate directly with Kosovo at the highest state level, thereby avoiding providing any sort of legitimacy to the regime in Pristina. At that time, the Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vuk Jeremić, tried to strengthen relations with the countries still refusing to recognise the Republic of Kosovo, while making efforts to revive the position that former Yugoslavia has enjoyed among developing countries and the Non-Aligned Movement. Yet, it also meant cultivating good relations with the People’s Republic of China – seen as a most valuable Serbian ally (and the second most important one after the Russian Federation). Following that trend, the former Serbian President Boris Tadić – although highly appreciated in Europe for his pro-Western orientations – paid visits to Beijing four times during his presidency.

At that time, the possible alliances with Russia and China were often perceived and considered as an alternative to the EU. Such ideas appeared more vibrant and increasingly present in the Serbian political arena, being advocated by both opposition and some elements within the governing coalition. Today, however, those ideas seem to have vanished from the political dialogues in Serbia and were pushed to the periphery of the political arena.

In March 2014, the Serbian voters were called for early general elections. The ballot boxes confirmed the supremacy of the SNS, led by the current vice-premier and the strongest political figure in Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic. However, despite the majority, which gave the SNS possibility to solely form the government, they again invited SPS and minority parties to share the governing responsibility in such a complicated, at least economically, period for Serbia. Not only the elections saw a political elimination of some traditionally parliamentarian parties, in particular those with the anti-EU and pro-Russian rhetoric.

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This article will examine whether or not China could provide an alternative, both economically and politically, to the European integration of Serbia. Further, an assessment will be made of the current relations between the two countries, and an analysis in which direction they could be heading in the future.

1.1 A regional troublemaker

Serbia is not a usual country, its geostrategic position and a turbulent history makes it the special one in the region. Indeed, historically, it has always played an important role on the Balkan Peninsula, very often found in the middle of the global disputes. One of which being the assassination of Austria's archduke Francis Ferdinand by a Serbian-Bosnian patriot, presenting a triggering event for the First World War. Accordingly, many Serbians believe that their country is of a bigger importance than its size and strength would naturally allow for, a feeling common for most of the countries in the region. The sentiment that Serbia is still at crossroads and on a mission, is still alive among many Serbians. A history full of myths constructed and strengthened during years of suffering and heavy national losses only fed their nationalistic sentiments, which often collided with European aspirations of the country. Thus, while most of the states in the region accepted the inevitability of becoming a part of the European family, Serbia was facing an internal struggle between its European identity and anti-Western, pro-Russian sentiments.

Today's Serbia, while far from being the strongest state in the region, still plays a key role within the regional security framework. Without Belgrade's political willingness and efforts, no long-lasting political stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina will be possible. Although under different circumstances and on a different scale, Belgrade is partly responsible for the political stability in Montenegro. In both countries there is a strong Serbian presence in population, mostly consisting of people born and raised in those respective countries, yet nationally identifying themselves as Serbs, offering Belgrade a significant political leverage. These countries, in different ways and with different experiences, were historically closely related to Serbia, while their sovereignty often depending on Serbia's strength and international position.

Similarly, Serbia – even if it de facto lost its Southern province Kosovo – is still the master of Kosovo's destiny. Yet, without Belgrade's acceptance, Kosovo will never be recognized by all members of the Security Council and thereby cannot enjoy a seat, nor membership in the UN, often perceived as the ultimate acknowledgement of a country's sovereignty. Many times, it has been declared by Moscow and Beijing, both permanent members of the Security Council, that they will follow the steps set out by the official Belgrade in defining their policy towards Pristina. This intrinsically entails the possibility of using their veto powers and thereby blocking Kosovo's membership of the UN. Further, Serbia de facto controls the Northern parts of Kosovo, where the Serbian population is in majority, preventing the government in Pristina to exercise effective control in the whole of its territory.

Another fact that makes Serbia a special case is its reluctance to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). While all other countries in the region, those who have joined or intend to join it, see NATO as the ultimate guarantor of the precious peace process in the Balkan, Serbia stays firm in its decision not to join its former enemy. Serbia's proclamation of neutrality, one not as common in the region, opened the door for military cooperation with Moscow and Beijing. In that spirit, Moscow opened a Regional Humanitarian Centre in Niš (close to the border with Kosovo), a facility that Washington fears could transform from "a centre for a fast response in the case of humanitarian disasters" to a potential military base in the future (*Blic*, 18 Sep. 2011). Today, however, such a possibility remains remote.

From its side, Beijing is less ambitious. It is rather interested in military cooperation possibly leading to Serbia's purchase of Chinese weapons and maybe a creation of joint ventures for exploration of third markets. Over the past seven years, military cooperation significantly improved, even more than in other fields. Former Minister of Defense Dragan Šutanovac described military cooperation with China as an example for other sectors, while stressing its potential (*Xinhua*, 7 Sep. 2009). However, the exchange of officers, arms trade, and other similar cooperation between Serbia and China, can hardly have a major impact on regional balances, and the NATO is most probably destined to remain the mightiest watchdog in the region in the years to come.

Nonetheless, the rise of China and the return of Russia to the scene, have offered a security alternative to Serbia. It is not so in cold war terms, but one that is sufficient to make a country stay outside of the Western security framework even if located inside an imaginary European sphere of interest, at least for the time being.

1.2 Wild but attractive

Although Serbia is not the most politically and economically stable country according to European standards, it is far more attractive for a partnership than most of the other countries in the region. The main reasons are its size, population, geographical position and huge industrial potential.

While many in Serbia are frustrated that their country still remains outside of the European Union, such a status gives Serbia the occasion to explore other opportunities. Being so close, yet still so far away from the EU, allows for more freedom in foreign policy, making a country more accessible to states with somewhat turbulent relations with the West.

Even if everything goes the right way, Serbia will most probably not join the EU before 2020, which offers to potential investors a perfect opening for investments. Namely, on the one hand the country has a certainty of joining the Union, while on the other hand it still has some flexibility and economical liberty to permit investors to be less restricted by EU standards, or more – to gradually adapt to them. Sometimes, it could bring interesting economical advantages if, of course, applied by the authorities in a proper way.

Serbia enjoys the benefits of the Interim Trade Agreement with the EU and Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Belarus and Turkey, while it adheres to the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA). Such agreements, while compensating for a relatively small internal market (an eight million population, which is the biggest market in the region), make Serbia an excellent destination for investment in export-oriented industries. Yet, many Western based companies (for example Italian car producer FIAT, US Steel, Michelin, Delhaize, Gazprom, Carlsberg, Heineken, Stada, Telenor...) have invested important assets in Serbia.

The geostrategic position of the Balkan Peninsula makes this region an inevitable crossroads for energy routes connecting Western Europe with Central and Western Asian countries, abundant with energy resources. Throughout the last decade, the region has been a playground for an important energy sector game between the EU and the US, on the one side, and the Russian Federation on the other, both supporting respective gas routes (Russia – its Southern stream pipeline, and the West – its Nabucco). Consequently, the region became very attractive for foreign companies working in the energy sector.

Beijing, although it has no direct interests in the mentioned pipelines, announced interests in other energy fields in the region. Namely, by signing the Energy Community Treaty in Athens in 2005, Serbia together with another eight regional countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Croatia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Romania and Kosovo UMNİK) created conditions to gradually adhere to the European Energy

Community. That means, as pointed out by Loic Poulain (2011, pp 4) of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the mentioned countries have to “build an adequate regulatory framework, liberalize their energy markets, and implement a set of energy security and efficiency in line with relevant EU legislation”. In other words, the region needs huge investments in order to meet the requirements that will eventually lead to integration in the EU market. China has vast financial resources (something which most EU companies lack at the moment) and expertise in the field to jump in and, as Bowden (2012) wrote, to “set up shop in Europe’s backyard”.

2. Distant Friends

The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Jovan Čavoški (2011) writes, has been the only socialist country, along with the Soviet Union, that was allowed to recognise the nationalist government of Chiang Kai Shek². The recognition, although non-publicised and kept in secrecy, has never been officially withdrawn but rather a new one has been made for the People’s Republic of China when the nationalistic government was finally eliminated. The same author (Čavoški, 2011) reveals less known history that China played an important role during the early ‘40s in the establishment of the relations between, the Yugoslavian kingdom, and the Soviet Union. Later, during the Cold War, Beijing even had intentions to open a propaganda centre for the whole of Europe in Belgrade, which shows the popularity Yugoslavia enjoyed in Beijing at that time (Čavoški, 2011).

Yet, Sino-Yugoslavian (later Serbian) relations are full of emotional moments and interesting tales. Beijing never abandoned its distant friend, even when Moscow almost did so in 1999, during the war between Yugoslavia (at that time composed of Serbia and Montenegro) and NATO. China stayed firm in its support to defiant president Milošević, which ultimately brought it to the bombing of its embassy in Belgrade.

In the place where the embassy was based, a memorial plaque has been installed to symbolise the connection the event had created between the two countries (*Politika*, 8 May 2009): “*In the name of gratitude to the People’s Republic of China, for the support and friendship that gave to people of the Republic of Serbia, in their worst moments, and to remember the victims*”.

It is still unclear whether the bombing was a deliberate act in order to punish China “after discovering it was being used to transmit Yugoslav army communications”, or a tragic mistake due to a use of “out-dated maps” (*The Guardian*, 17 Oct. 1999). However, this event will remain a symbol of Chinese weakness and yet another humiliation from the West. It remains one of those childhood traumas never to be forgotten.

Anyhow, the tragic events have created a connection between the two peoples (Chinese and Serbian), to be regularly used within the political rhetoric when it comes to praise the relations between the two countries.

Sino-Serbian relations survived even the fall of President Milošević, who enjoyed strong support in Beijing, and his subsequent extradition to the International Crime Tribunal in Hague. Despite the fact that Serbia sent its president to an international tribunal and Serbia’s new political path directed to the West, Beijing soon congratulated Serbia with its new president and banned Milošević’s son from entering China (*The New York Times*, 10 Aug. 2000). However, mostly due to Serbian internal political turbulences and major economical challenges, the relations were somewhat stagnating in the early post-Milošević period. A real revival of their relations came during the presidency of Boris Tadić, with his four visits to Beijing, the inauguration of different infrastructural projects and the signing of a strategic partnership.

² At that time any major foreign policy decision within the Socialist Bloc, had to receive some sort of the approval from the Soviet Union, a supreme leader of the bloc.

The Strategic Partnership between the Republic of Serbia and the People's Republic of China, signed on 20 August 2009, is a first agreement of this kind for Serbia and at that time only the fifth for China. Nonetheless, Serbia joined a small group of five countries, together with Russia, the United States, South Africa and Brazil, which stipulated similar agreements with Beijing. As the Serbian newspaper (*Press*, 22 Aug. 2009) wrote, many in Western Europe were surprised when Serbia's Far Eastern strategic partnership was made public.

Soon after the Agreement was signed, many projects were announced. The giant Chinese car producer Dong Feng was interested in setting up cooperation with the Serbian state-owned car producer FAP from Priboj and a memorandum of mutual understanding was signed. However, a final agreement has never been reached due to the impossibility of both sides to agree on the responsibility for the distribution of the jointly produced vehicles (*Blic*, 28 January 2011).

China also expressed serious interests in Serbian energy sectors. The Chinese company China Machinery Engineering Corporation (CMEC) intended to invest more than EUR 700 millions mainly provided by the Chinese Exim Bank in Kostolac thermal power station (*B92*, 22 Aug. 2013). Chinese companies also expressed their interests for a project worth EUR 2 billion for construction of the thermal power plant "Nikola Tesla B3", potentially the largest single investment in Serbia in last two decades, for which a protocol on cooperation has been signed (*RTS*, 20 Oct. 2012). However, it seems likely that German RWE, which was preferred by the Serbian government, will probably win the bid for this project.

One of the most visible Chinese investments (if not the only one so far), however, is the Borča-Zemun bridge "of friendship" worth EUR 170 million, already coined "the Chinese bridge". The Exim Bank mainly financed the bridge construction, which is seen as a pilot project for future cooperation. The China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC), is supposed to complete the work in 2014 (*Blic*, 8 August 2013).

The red carpets rolled out for Serbian officials visiting Beijing, and strong friendly words spoken by the Chinese statesmen were completing the picture of a perfect friendship. However, the enthusiasm in Belgrade for its new old friend soon calmed down when Serbia was urged to take up its part.

When Liu Xiaobo, considered a "criminal who broke China's laws" by Chinese authorities (*FMPRC Press*, 9 Oct. 2010), or a Human Rights activist and a political prisoner, according to Western media, received the Nobel Prize for peace "for his long and non-violent struggle for fundamental human rights in China", Beijing, as expected, protested loudly, calling its partners to abstain and ignore the ceremony. Serbia followed, and the Sino-Serbian alliance came to disturb Belgrade's relations with Brussels.

Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs Vuk Jeremić (*BBC*, 9 Dec. 2010), tried to defend the government's decision from the critics inside the country and by Western partners: "perhaps it does not leave the best taste in the mouth, but we had to take into account our relations with key political players in the world". Brussels was infuriated with the move made by Serbia, which has not had a good human rights record itself in the past, however choosing to align with China in such a sensitive matter as the issue of Human Rights. For China, it was a remarkable achievement to align a fresh European democracy and a future member of the EU by its side. According to Serbian newspaper *Danas* (11 Oct. 2011), the decision of the Serbian government was in line with the Serbian policy towards China and followed the logic of their agreements and meetings.

Nevertheless, the Sino-Serbian relations continued to improve with the new government and president, both from the former conservative camp. Following his predecessor's steps, Serbian President Tomislav Nikolic, "an old friend of Chinese people", to use the words of Chinese President Xi Jinping, paid a visit to Beijing, as the first president from Eastern and Central Europe to be received by his newly installed Chinese counterpart (*Tanjug*, 26 Aug. 2013). Again, a complete state protocol, strong words of friendship and commitments to further improve the relations were dominating the event.

2.2 A perfect match

It is impossible not to notice that Serbia's intensified relations with China coincided with the process of Kosovo's independency, or at least when it became clear that Pristina - strongly supported by its powerful Western allies - would seek a unilateral solution for its cause after the negotiations inevitably broke off.

Turning to China was somehow an imposed solution for Serbia. If Belgrade wanted to defend the sovereignty of its territory and hamper the independence of its Southern province, it had to find other alliances in addition to Russia. As a result, China was approached in a more serious way, being an old friend with similar foreign policy principles and now stronger than ever. Aligning with Beijing (as was the case with Moscow) also implied gaining the support of its friends, at a time when Serbia needed some friends within the UN more than ever. China, sided by the army of developing countries was an uneasy rival for the West, while also an ally that could prevent Serbia's encirclement within the international institutions.

Even without Serbia insisting, it was clear that Beijing (already strongly against intervention in Yugoslavia in 1999) would have been more than reluctant to recognise Kosovo, especially considering internal similarities, *in primis* Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang. However, moving beyond abstentions, Belgrade required China to be more active and supportive, thus reviving its relations with Beijing.

Indeed, Beijing became more active in the "mission impossible" of defending the Serbian territorial integrity, to which it committed in its Strategic Partnership with Serbia. China defended its stands on Kosovo in a public hearing before the international court, where China reassumed one of its main foreign policy principles in point number 15: *Respect for territorial integrity of a sovereign State is one of the fundamental principles of contemporary international law. It plays the central role in the international legal system and serves as the cornerstone of the international legal order. Respect for territorial integrity is the essence of the principle of sovereign equality of States.*

Besides the political motives behind Serbia insisting on good relations with Beijing, economical aspects need to be taken into account. As Halper (2010, pp 3) highlights in his influential book *Beijing Consensus*, "Chinese have become a critical source of financial autonomy for smaller countries as well as a beacon of ideas and management expertise about capitalism in a less Western, less liberal format". Thus, Belgrade could count not only on political support from Beijing, but also on lucrative financial arrangements with the world's second largest economy.

For Serbia, still trying to recover from more than a decade of continuous crisis, the aid from the EU through different accession funds is of vital importance for its economy. However, at the same time, Brussels have been using its financial assistance as leverage to force Serbia into aligning with European standards. Thus, Beijing came in as an appreciated alternative and a supplement to the EU support, leaving more space for deliberations and careful calculations towards Brussels.

On the other hand, Serbia comes as a perfect starting point for Beijing, which has been trying to reinvent its influence in Southeast Europe. Yet, there are several Chinese interests at stake in Serbia, of which none is to be underestimated.

Firstly, Beijing's support to Serbia regarding Kosovo was not only a sign of friendship towards its strategic partner in the region. Rather, China had to clearly reconfirm its stands regarding state sovereignty, considered by Beijing as one of the main principles that should be governing the international relations.

Secondly, providing support to Serbia in its diplomatic efforts to halt the breakup of the region, China received Serbia's abstaining to any document criticising China or its allies before the UN (*Danas*, 11 Oct. 2011). If today it means Serbian support within the UN, tomorrow it could mean a welcome additional support in Brussels. With Serbia's likely accession to the EU, China could increase its influence in the European institutions through Serbia.

Thirdly, with Belgrade abstaining from joining NATO, China obtained a solid partner for military cooperation, one that still does not need to follow the EU arms embargo towards China (Poulain, 2011). Through cooperation with Serbia's military industry, China could explore new markets to which Serbian enterprises have access and receive, although modest, new know-how solutions (Poulain, 2011).

Finally, as mentioned above, Serbia, thirsty for investments, especially in the energy sector, is an interesting destination for Chinese enterprises. By investing in Serbia (and the region as a whole) Chinese companies could gradually find themselves entering the European Union market. Serbia and the region offer abundant opportunities for Chinese companies willing to invest in relatively stable markets with major future potential.

Due to abovementioned history of Sino-Yugoslavian relations, as well as some shared foreign policy goals and interests, Belgrade was easily approached by China while its interests there seem well protected.

3. An alternative that never existed

No one can deny Sino-Serbian relations have been flourishing in the last five years. However, they could not match the intensity of the relations Serbia maintains with the EU, politically and economically. As a matter of fact, the possibility of China, together with Russia, could provide an alternative to Serbia's EU integration process, never received a broader support at the official political level in Belgrade.

Under the government of the pro-European coalition and presidency of Boris Tadić, when the current ruling party, the SNS enjoyed the status of strongest opposition party, Serbia appeared to be struggling between the West and the East. At that time Serbian government set out four pillars in its foreign policy, namely Washington, Moscow, Brussels and Beijing (without a clear hierarchical order), emphasizing their choices in addition to Brussels. Furthermore, President Tadić and his government used the anti-European rhetoric of the opposition back then, showing their sponsors in Brussels and Washington they were the only right option for Serbia, thereby receiving more tolerance for sometimes not obliging to their rules.

However, once the government changed and a new president was elected, the curtains fell and it became clear that the rhetoric of turning to the East and aligning with Russia or China were empty political words.

Indeed, at that time, those still in power today were the loudest advocates of the "Eastern route". Yet, only by their complete turn of course towards Brussels and the support they gained abroad as a consequence, they were actually able to win both the presidential and parliamentary elections. From their part, those who still remained faithful to the idea of *euro scepticism*, suffered a heavy defeat.

This state of the affairs also reflects the Serbian public opinion, eventually becoming tired of suffering Belgrade's rebellious foreign policy. Nevertheless, the Official Belgrade never made an actual step towards any sort of political strategy that could make it less dependent of the EU, nor did official Belgrade manage to produce any alternative to the EU development path. Rather, the Serbian politicians have been applying a concept of "looking to the East" as a way of gaining a short-lasting public support, redirecting the attention of the people away from some of the burning problems in the country itself. Ultimately, turning to the East started to entail a closing to the West and recalled the terrible years of international isolation during the 1990s.

When taking into consideration economical indicators, Sino-Serbian relations reveal their full weakness. China does not appear among Serbia's main trading partners, while it plays only an important role in Serbian imports. As it could be seen from the figures gathered by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2012):

The major foreign trade partners in exports in the reference period (year 2012) were: Germany (USD 1315.7 million), Italy (USD 1201.0 million), Bosnia and Herzegovina (USD 1082.5 million), Romania (USD 935.9 million) and the Russian Federation (USD 867.1 million).

The major foreign trade partners in imports in the reference period (2012) were: the Russian Federation (USD 2078.6 million), Germany (USD 2066.3 million), Italy (USD 1840.5 million), China (USD 1386.7 million) and Hungary (USD 936.9 million).

The figures for Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) are even less encouraging, where 4/5 of FDIs in Serbia since 2001 originate from EU members, as the table below shows.

(in EUR)	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Total FDI (EUR)	2,193,035	1,742,980	1,107,614	2,206,836	851,523
FDI from EU (EUR)	1,783,558	1,171,315	871,025	1,948,918	547,343
Percentage of EU FDI from Total FDI	81.33%	67.2%	78.63%	88.31%	64.28%

Source: National Bank of Serbia; Table provided from the website of the Delegation of the EU to Republic of Serbia

The figures above certainly show the evident lack of large-scale financial benefits in Sino-Serbian relations and the discrepancy between what has been agreed and implemented on the other hand. The Sino-Serbian rapprochement over the last decade should, however, be seen as a solid framework for their future relations, yet having to give economical fruits to Belgrade, but also to Beijing. China traditionally approaches countries by gradually trying to find common interests and fields for cooperation, taking its time to create solid and long-lasting cooperation with future partners.

As far as becoming an alternative to the EU or other countries, Beijing has neither such interests, nor willingness in the Balkan region. Nor is China interested in Serbia isolated from the EU. Rather, Beijing considers Serbia a formidable partner for the future, as it could represent a pro-Chinese vote in Brussels and open a door for further economical advancement in Europe, or as the Serbian President Nikolić figuratively stated during his visit to Beijing, provide for "a Chinese island in the European ocean". Regarding most of the political issues China will most likely remain neutral, or at least become active only when its national interests are at stake (as partly and indirectly was the case in Kosovo). In other matters, it will leave Russia in place as the leading Shanghai Cooperation Organisation member on the European side of the hemisphere.

The strategy that China is adopting towards Serbia is much in line with the broader Chinese strategy for Europe in the past several years. Beijing is putting more and more efforts in approaching single countries, and giving preferences to bilateral relations. According to Godement, Parello-Plesner and Richard (2011: p.1), from the European Council on Foreign Relations, China uses the crisis in Europe to “play off member states against each other and against their own collective interests – replicating a strategy China has already used in the developing world.” According to the same authors, such a policy is harmful to the EU as it leads to “fragmentation of EU-China policy”.

The same approach China is taking with the countries that recently joined the Union, and those waiting to join. Yet, as the report of the Warsaw based Central and Eastern Europe Development Institute avers in one of its publications (2012: p. 14):

“Given the size of these economies, it is clear there are strategic reasons for Chinese investment. China needs the political support of these smaller member states vis a vis the larger ones... In addition, in the EU, the alliance of smaller states in favour of China could influence EU decision making considerably in China’s interests.”

If observed through this prism, the Chinese strategy towards Serbia is not very different.

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